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# THE GREEK QUESTION:

*REMARKS MADE AT THE DINNER OF THE HARVARD  
CLUB OF RHODE ISLAND, NEWPORT,  
AUGUST 25, 1883.*

BY JOSIAH PARSONS COOKE.

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“THE GREEK QUESTION.”\*

BY JOSIAH PARSONS COOKE,  
PROFESSOR OF CHEMISTRY IN HARVARD COLLEGE.

THE question whether the college faculty ought to continue to insist on a limited study of the ancient Greek language, as an essential prerequisite of receiving the A. B. degree, has been under consideration at Cambridge for a long time ; and, since the opinions of those with whom I naturally sympathize have been so greatly misrepresented in the desultory discussion which has followed Mr. Adams's Phi Beta Kappa oration, I am glad of the opportunity to say a few words on the “Greek question.”

This question is by no means a new one. For the last ten years it has been under discussion at most, if not at all, of the great universities of the world ; and, among others, the University of Berlin, which stands in the very front rank, has already conceded to what we may call the new culture all that can reasonably be asked.

Let me begin by asserting that the responsible advocates of an expansion of the old academic system do not wish in the least degree to diminish the study of the Greek language, the Greek literature, or the Greek art. On the contrary, they wish to encourage such studies by every legitimate means. For myself I believe that the old classical culture is the best culture yet known for the literary professions ; and among the literary professions I include both law and divinity. Fifty years ago I should have said that it was the only culture worthy of the recognition of a university. But we live in the present, not in the past, and a half-century has wholly changed the relations of human

\* Remarks made at the dinner of the Harvard Club of Rhode Island, Newport, August 25, 1883.

knowledge. Regard the change with favor or disfavor, as you please, the fact remains that the natural sciences have become the chief factors of our modern civilization ; and—which is the important point in this connection—they have given rise to new professions which more and more every year are opening occupations to our educated men. The professions of the chemist, of the mining engineer, and of the electrician, which have entirely grown up during the lifetime of many here present, are just as “learned” as the older professions, and are recognized as such by every university. Moreover, the old profession of medicine, which, when, as formerly, wholly ruled by authority or traditions, might have been classed with the literary professions, has come to rest on a purely scientific basis.

In a word, the distinction between the literary and the scientific professions has become definite and wide, and can no longer be ignored in our systems of education. Now, while they would accord to their classical associates the right to decide what is the best culture for a literary calling, the scientific experts claim an equal right to decide what is the best culture for a scientific calling. Ever since the revival of Greek learning in Europe the literary scholars have been working out an admirable system of education. In this system most of us have been trained. I would pay it all honor, and I would here bear my testimony to the acknowledged facts that in no departments of our own university have the methods of teaching been so much improved during the last few years as in the classical. I should resist as firmly as my classical colleagues any attempt to emasculate the well-tried methods of literary culture, and I have no sympathy whatever with the opinion that the study of the modern languages as polite accomplishments can in any degree take the place of the critical study of the great languages of antiquity. To compare German literature with the Greek, or, what is worse, French literature with the Latin, as means of culture, implies, as it seems to me, a forgetfulness of the true spirit of literary culture.

But literature and science are very different things, and “what is one man’s meat may be another man’s poison,” and the scientific teachers claim the right to direct the training of their own men. It is not their aim to educate men to clothe thought in beautiful and suggestive language, to weave argument into correct and persuasive forms, or to kindle enthusiasm by eloquence. But it is their object to prepare men to unravel the mysteries of the universe, to probe the secrets of disease, to direct the forces of nature, and to develop the resources of this earth. These last aims may be less spiritual, lower on your arbitrary intellectual scale, if you please, than the first ; but they are none the less legitimate aims which society demands of educated men : and all we claim is that the astronomers, the physicists, the chemists, the biologists, the physicians, and the engineers, who have shown that they are able to answer these demands of society,



should be intrusted with the training of those who are to follow them in the same work.

Now, such is the artificial condition of our schools, and so completely are they ruled by prescription, that, when we attempt to lay out a proper course of training for the scientific professions, we are met at the very outset by the Greek question. Greek is a requisition for admission to college, and the only schools in which a scientific training can be had do not teach Greek, and, what is more, can not be expected to teach it.

This brings us to the root of the whole difficulty with which the teachers of natural science have been contending, and which is the cause of the present movement. We can not obtain any proper scientific training from the classical schools, and the present requisitions for admission to college practically exclude students prepared at any others. At Cambridge we have vainly tried to secure some small measure of scientific training in the classical schools: first, by establishing summer courses in practical science especially designed for training teachers, and chiefly resorted to by such persons; and, secondly, by introducing some science requisitions into the admission examinations. But the attempt has been an utter failure. The science requisitions have been simply “crammed,” and the result has been worse than useless; because, instead of securing any training in the methods of science, it has in most cases given a distaste for the whole subject. True science-teaching is so utterly foreign to all their methods that the requisitions have merely hampered the classical schools, and the sooner they are abandoned the better. Both the methods and the spirit of literary and scientific culture are so completely at variance that we can not expect them to be successfully united in the same preparatory school.

We look, therefore, to entirely different schools for the two kinds of preparation for the university which modern society demands—schools which, for the want of better distinctive names, we may call classical and scientific schools. In the classical school the aim should be, as it has always been, literary culture, and the end should be that power of clothing thought in words which awakens thought. Of course, the results of natural science must to a certain extent be taught; for even literary men can not afford to be wholly ignorant of the great powers that move the world. But the natural sciences should be studied as useful knowledge, not as a discipline, and such teaching should not be permitted in the least degree to interfere with the serious business of the place. In the scientific school, on the other hand, while language must be taught, it should be taught as a means, not as an end. The educated man of science must command at least French and German—and for the present a limited amount of Latin—as well as his mother-tongue, because science is cosmopolitan. But these languages should be acquired as tools, and studied no further than they

are essential to the one great end in view, that knowledge which is the essential condition of the power of observing, interpreting, and ruling natural phenomena.

In such a course as this it is obvious that the study of Greek would have no place, even if there were time to devote to it, and we can not alter the appointed span of human life, even out of respect to this most honored and worthy representative of the highest literary culture. Of course, no one will question that the scholar who can command both the literary and the scientific culture will be thereby so much the stronger and more useful man; and certainly let us give every opportunity to the "double firsts" to cultivate all their abilities, and so the more efficiently to benefit the world. But such powers are rare, and the great body of the scientific professions must be made up of men who can only do well the special class of work in which they have been trained; and, if you make certain formal and arbitrary requisitions, like a small amount of Greek, obstacles in the way of their advancement, or of that social recognition to which they feel themselves entitled as educated men, those requisitions must necessarily be slighted, and your policy will give rise to that cry of "fetich" of which recently we have heard so much.

Now, all the schools which prepare students for Harvard College are classical schools. We do not wish to alter these schools in any respect, unless to make them more thorough in their special work. As I have already said, the small amount of study of natural science which we have forced upon them has proved to be a wretched failure, and the sooner this hindrance is got out of their way the better. We do not wish to alter the studies of such schools as the Boston and Roxbury Latin Schools, the Exeter and Andover Academies, the St. Paul's and the St. Mark's Schools, and the other great feeders of the college. No—not in the least degree! We do not ask for any change which in our opinion will diminish the number of those coming to the college with a classical preparation by a single man. We look for our scientific recruits to wholly different and entirely new sources. For, although we think that there are many students now coming to us through the classical schools who would run a better chance of becoming useful men if they were trained from the beginning in a different way, yet such is the social prestige of the old classical schools and of the old classical culture that, whatever new relations might be established, the class of students which alone we now have would, I am confident, all continue to come through the old channels.

This is not a mere opinion; for only a very few men avail themselves of the limited option which we now permit at the entrance examinations—nine, at least, out of ten, offering what is called maximum in classics.

We look, then, for no change in the classical schools. Our only

expectation is to affiliate the college with a wholly different class of schools, which will send us a wholly different class of students, with wholly different aims, and trained according to a wholly different method. At the outset we shall look to the best of our New England high-schools for a limited supply of scientific students, and hope by constant pressure to improve the methods of teaching in these schools, as our literary colleagues have within ten years vastly improved the methods in the classical schools. In time we hope to bring about the establishment of special academies which will do for science-culture what Exeter and St. Paul's are doing for classical culture. We expect to establish a set of requisitions just as difficult as the classical requisitions—only they will be requisitions which have a different motive, a different spirit, and a different aim ; and all we ask is, that they should be regarded as the equivalents of the classical requisitions so far as college standing is concerned. We do not at once expect to draw many students through these new channels. To improve methods of teaching and build up new schools is a work of years. But we have the greatest confidence that in time we shall thus be able to increase very greatly both the clientage and the usefulness of the university.

Is this heresy? Is this revolution? Is it not rather the scientific method seeking to work out the best results in education as elsewhere by careful observation and cautious experimenting, unterrified by authority or superstition? Certainly, the philologist must respect our method ; for of all the conquests of natural science none is more remarkable than its conquest of the philologists themselves. They have adopted the scientific methods as well as the scientific spirit of investigation ; but, while thus widening and classifying their knowledge, they have rendered the critical study of language more abstruse and more difficult ; and this is the chief reason why the time of preparation for our college has been so greatly extended during the last twenty-five years. Nominally, the classical schools cover no more ground than formerly, but they cultivate that ground in a vastly more thorough and scientific way.

These increased requirements of modern literary culture suggest another consideration, which we can barely mention on this occasion. How long will the condition of our new country permit its youths to remain in pupilage until the age of twenty-three or twenty-four ; on an average at least three years later than in any of the older countries of the civilized world? It is all very well that every educated man should have a certain acquaintance with what have been called the “humanities.” But when your system comes to its present results, and demands of the physician, the chemist, and the engineer—whose birthright is a certain social status, which by accident you temporarily control—that he shall pass fully four years of the training period of his life upon technicalities, which, however important to a literary

man, are worthless in his future calling, is it not plain that your conservatism has become an artificial barrier which the progress of society must sooner or later sweep away? Is it not the part of wisdom, however much pain it may cost, to sacrifice your traditional preferences gracefully when you can direct the impending change, and not to wait until the rush of the stream can not be controlled?









